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ABSTRACT

Based on the concept that more occupational choices are opening to both men and women and that career development has become more complex, this review considers two questions: (1) Why do gifted and talented men and women limit themselves to traditional career choices? and (2) How can counselors, teachers, and parents help gifted students broaden their career options? The role of socialization and perceived gender distinctions in career choice is discussed. Past research dealing with sex role stereotypes is examined, and the correlation of cognitive development and sex role development is discussed. The materials also review ways in which parents, counselors and teachers can help by providing role models, discussing dual career families, role playing family and career decisions, examining traditional and non-traditional sex roles and families, and being aware of media stereotypes. (JAC)

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SEX ROLES AS THEY AFFECT TALENTED STUDENTS' CAREER DEVELOPMENT

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In present-day American society, more occupational doorways are opening to both females and males. The corollary to this is that individual career development becomes more complex. In light of these social realities, I will, in this paper, consider two questions: (1) Why might gifted and talented males or females, limit themselves to careers considered traditional for their genders with the doors opening to both traditional and non-traditional careers and lifestyles?, and (2) How can counselors, teachers and parents help gifted and talented students broaden their career options? These questions must be addressed by those concerned with the plight of the gifted and talented since there are, among the array, vocational choices now accessible to individuals, some lead to expansive and flowing paths of personal development, while others open onto pathways fraught with frustration. The latter, which I associate with a too strict adherence to traditionally-gender-specific careers, means taking routes that do not utilize individuals' broadest potentials. Following the more dynamic pathways, which I link with an openness to both traditional and non-traditional gender-related career options, means, on the

other hand, that individuals are recognizing their abilities and applying themselves optimally to all types of modalities and situations.

To begin to deal with the first question, it must be realized that, for males and females alike, lifestyle and career development choices primarily involve socialization. This socialization may erect barriers against the realization of individual potential (Hansen, 1980). For example, females have been, and are, conditioned to be the nurturers. Traditionally, in the job market, they have a low self-concept relative to males because they perceive their personalities to be characterized by less decisiveness and assertiveness than they deem to be true of males. Consequently, their traditionally female careers offer less money, power and status than those of males. Additionally, females face role conflicts (e.g., "Can I have a family and a career or do I have to choose between them?") and have to confront a society with a dearth of women in non-traditional careers and lifestyles serving as role models. Females suffer from not being work oriented -- they are not conditioned to think about and plan a career. Males, on the other hand, are conditioned to be the performers, providers and protectors. They are perceived to be decisive, assertive and to have careers proffering power, status, and money (Skovholt and Morgan, 1981). Decisiveness and assertiveness are considered to be positive traits and their possession,

along with the concommitant attainments of power, status and money, provide little incentive for males to change or to allow traditionally feminine characteristics to emerge. Males are generally restricted emotionally. (I agree with one of my collegues in GIFTS, John Pribyl, who suggests that, though females have a low self-concept in the job market, they have a high affective self-concept and may be more skilled in general than men because of the varied demands placed on them.) Males perceive it as a sign of weakness to give vent to their feelings by crying or seeking help. Vocational success may be everything for males; for them, occupational success equals high self-esteem (Skovholt and Morgan, 1981).

The importance of such perceived gender distinctions as the above cannot be overestimated. "Gender affects the emotions we are taught to exhibit, the personality traits we develop, the vocational inclinations we pursue, the goals we aspire to, the way we relate to our peers and authority, the responsibilities we expect to assume and how we define our individual identity." (Hopkins, 1980). Yet, recently there have been changes in our society that affect the lifestyle and role identity of both females and males. These changes include technological advances, newly-emergent family and work patterns, new educational programs, a strong women's movement and an emerging men's movement. The traditional attitude, that views men as the performers, providers and protectors, is changing (Hansen, 1980).

Children in contemporary society cannot help but be affected by the above societal changes. As a reflection of society, sex roles are becoming less traditional (Zuckerman and Sayre, 1980) and children's perceptions of sex roles follow this transformation. Elementary children have shown non-stereotypical views concerning which activities and occupations are appropriate in general for males and females. When they are given a list of occupations, they will say that both males and females can occupy those careers. However, sex role stereotyping continues to have a strong influence when they think about their own careers. Zuckerman and Sayre (1980) found extremely traditional career aspirations among elementary children.

Research conducted at the Guidance Institute for Talented Students (GIFTS) indicates that elementary-age talented females perceive themselves as having a choice between traditional and non-traditional careers (University of Wisconsin, Note 2). However, a follow-up study conducted at GIFTS indicates that high-school age talented females actually prepare for and choose traditional careers. In a study conducted by Alpert and Tysse (Note 1), male and female high school seniors were asked to decide what would be an "ideal" career and what would be a "real" career for them. Preliminary data analysis indicates that most of the males chose a traditionally masculine career for both their "ideal" and "real" careers. The females chose both traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine

careers for both their "ideal" and "real" careers. Females seem to be perceiving themselves as having more options than males in career choice.

Another finding relevant to sex role stereotypes and gifted students is that cognitive development seems to correlate with sex role development. (A characteristic of talented students is advanced cognitive development.) Leahy and Shirk (1980), conducted a study with four-, six-, and eight-year old children to ascertain sex-trait stereotypes and the ability to reclassify sex-traits. They found that, at the youngest age, children classified traits as stereotypical of a gender category, but that with increasing cognitive level these traits became less stereotypical of gender for them. As cognitive skills and classificatory skills advanced, so did the ability to recognize that one sex can maintain both "feminine" and "masculine" characteristics. The development of the conceptualization of sex roles paralleled the development of nonsocial cognitive skills. The ability to recognize multiple classificatory possibilities may have reflected increasing cognitive flexibility. Cognitive development also was found related to vocational perception. As cognitive development increased, boys and girls allowed themselves a choice from a broader range of occupations, reflecting their changing modes of understanding the occupational world (Nelson, 1978).

What does the above study imply about talented students? An hypothesis is that talented students, because of their advanced cognitive level, may have non-traditional sex role attitudes and be influenced less by sex role in their lifestyles. They may recognize that each female and male can maintain a balance of "masculine" and "feminine" characteristics. One must be cognizant of abilities, interests, values, attitudes and external pressures in accounting for sex role behaviors (Spence and Helmreich, 1980).

In addition to having advanced cognitive levels, talented students have multipotentiality and high expectations. They are able to consider a multitude of lifestyles and careers. Yet, talented males and females are still socialized into their traditional roles and, therefore, may not have access to experiences leading to non-traditional roles which may better meet their needs for personal achievement. These students may suppress their desire to perform in non-traditional roles for fear of appearing un-masculine or unfeminine. Even though talented females may have a strong career orientation, they may choose careers which require less preparation time and personal commitment or they may avoid planning careers until marriage and family issues are resolved.

A final consideration with regard to talented males and females and career is that members of this group may be highly educated and highly specialized and they are likely to choose spouses who

have at least the same level of education and career aspiration. This leads to dual career families -- families which face special problems of decision-making and redistribution of home and family responsibilities.

This brings me to the second of my original questions: How can counselors, teachers and parents help open the doors leading to the broad, flowing lifestyle and career pathways? How can we help students break down the barriers that society has erected in their way? How can we encourage students to discover sex role similarities rather than to dwell on sex role differences? The following are some strategies which suggest that through awareness and discussion, talented students can be helped to be cognizant of their abilities, interests, values, attitudes and external pressures and can increase the possibility of pursuing both traditional and non-traditional lifestyles and careers (for further reading and practical application activities, see "Additional Resources"):

1. Provide role models. Point out that throughout history both men and women have had non-traditional careers. Discuss specific examples illustrating this. Find men and women in the community who are in non-traditional occupations and arrange to visit them and have them visit your school: children are more impressed by what they actually see and experience than by what they read and hear about.

2. Discuss dual career families. An increasing number of couples have found themselves within the realm of dual work or dual career relationships, i.e., ones in which both the husband and wife work outside the home in addition to maintaining their family obligations. In a study now in progress (Alpert and Tysse, Note 1), the hypothesis is that students in dual career families will perceive themselves as having a wider range of lifestyle options than those in two parent families where only the father works.

3. Roleplay situations in which males and females face career and family decisions. For example, ask both the males and females to respond to the following questions: What would you (your spouse) do if you (your spouse) were offered a higher career position, you (your spouse) wanted it, and it required relocation? You (your spouse) have been requested to put in longer hours at your (your spouse's) job. This means you (your spouse) spend less time with your family and will not be able to go on a planned vacation. What do you (your spouse) do?

4. Discuss traditional vs. non-traditional sex roles, e.g., benefits and liabilities.

5. Discuss their families. What are the expectations of parents? Are they to "follow in their footsteps?" Should there be grandchildren? Are there expectations regarding money, status, power?

6. Discuss how television, movies, and advertising influence sex role stereotypes. Brainstorm on how media influences can be effectively changed: e.g., writing scripts that provide a broad spectrum of male and female emotions, vocations, and lifestyles, and that avoid the gratuitous inclusion of sex role stereotypes.

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* Elementary Level, Hansen, Pelcak, Perreault, Dege.
* Secondary Level, Hansen, Johnson, Hatfield, Teeson, Harper, Perreault.
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